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# European academic brain drain: A meta-synthesis

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## Abstract

In a globalising world, the international mobility of academics and researchers is important for their career. However, increasing migration of academics in the form of an academic brain drain is becoming a major challenge especially for Europe due to an ageing population. The issue of brain drain has been addressed usually through quantitative studies that fail to explore the in-depth reasons behind it, and present standard outcomes. Through a synthesis of qualitative literature over two decades (2000–2020), this paper presents a new perspective of the root causes of academic brain drain in Europe. After careful examination of the qualitative literature, five factors have been found to be responsible for the outflow of human capital. These include: (1) attractive salaries outside Europe; (2) short-term fixed contracts for early career researchers; (3) unfair recruitment procedures; (4) attractive migration policies and (5) the indirect role played by internationalisation policies to encourage permanent mobility.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent years, mobility of *brains*, especially the mobility of academics and researchers in higher education has gained momentum (Kim, 2017). The internationalisation policies of higher education in Europe in terms of the Bologna and Lisbon processes have stimulated both the mobility within Europe and the immigration to Europe to enhance European competitiveness in higher education (De Wit, 2012; Teichler, 2009). At the same time, there is a dark side to European academic mobility: the emigration to other countries in the form of brain drain or human capital loss (Ackers, 2008; Grigolo et al, 2010; Teichler, 2009). Contrary to the short-term mobility encouraged by internationalisation policies, brain drain is the permanent outflow of highly skilled migrants from a country,

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in search of better opportunities (Beine et al, 2001; Bhagwati & Hamada, 1974) such as higher salaries, better working conditions, access to advanced technology and quality of life (Panagiotakopoulos, 2020). Such patterns of migration have a detrimental impact on the economy of the country of origin (Beine et al, 2001), while academic brain drain can additionally endanger the very foundations of a country's higher education and research sector in the era of knowledge-based economies.

The mobility of academics can be understood either in relation to individual decisions or in relation to policies—i.e., the effect of macro-level national and international policies. However, we fail to recognise that individual decisions are also constrained by policy discourses prevalent in global higher education competition (Cantwell, 2011). Thus, an aim of this article is to capture the issue of academic brain drain from the perspective of individual decisions constrained by policy discourses. The literature on brain drain has provided exhaustive quantitative measurements across a range of employment sectors from developing to developed countries. What differentiates the study on which this article reports is that it compared regional academic brain drain globally, considering the 27 European Union (EU) countries (plus the UK) as a region, through a meaningful analysis and thorough synthesis of previous qualitative studies. Despite the heterogeneity within EU countries, the reason to focus on brain drain in the EU was to explore the common influence of internationalisation policies on EU countries.

Brain drain is a common phenomenon in developing countries, but it is also becoming a cause of concern in developed nations. This is due to (a) a global *war of talent* to maximise global economic competitiveness and (b) efforts to prevent skilled labour shortages due to ageing populations (Brown & Tannock, 2009). For instance, the EU is continuously losing its researchers and potential academics to the US, causing a European academic brain drain (Grigolo et al, 2010). Although the brain drain from EU to other continents may seem small in absolute numbers (about 4% of European highly skilled researchers leave for the US), one cannot ignore the loss of human capital (Blau, 2004). The southern and eastern European Union member states have already experienced higher emigration rates impacting their economic growth; while this scenario if applied to the whole of EU would shrink the working age population of EU from 306 million to 150 million by 2060 (Lutz et al, 2019). Further, *Brexit*, the decision of the UK to leave the EU, is going to challenge the attractiveness of the European Research Area (ERA) as the UK has been an integral part of the EU in attracting international researchers (Courtois & Veiga, 2020). Against this backdrop, the purpose of this study was to improve our understanding about the reasons for academic brain drain from Europe in general and specifically to scour the extant literature on the impact of internationalisation policies on brain drain. The three main arguments on which the present review and analysis builds were the following.

First, brain drain is not a south to north flow anymore, it is going in all directions including north-north, south-south, north-south and south-north. It cannot be classified as a unidirectional flow of highly skilled talent; rather it is multidirectional. Brain drain can be *geographical* (from one country or continent to another) or *sectoral* (from the public to the private sector). The focus in this article is on *geographical* brain drain of the following types.

1. from the Global South to the Global North (e.g., from Asia and Africa to Europe or the US)
2. within Europe (from less developed to developed states) (Musselin, 2004)
3. from the UK to the EU after Brexit (Helm, 2020)
4. from the 27 EU countries plus the UK to other states and continents

Since the studies reviewed include a period when the UK was still part of the EU, the UK has been included as a location of brain drain. For this reason, *the EU* and *Europe* have been used interchangeably throughout the text. The role of the US as an attractive destination for academic brain drain from Europe has been a specific focus of this research. Although there are also some problems with the US higher education system, the relative openness of the US academic system and economy make it a globally attractive migrant destination. Also, there have been flows of academics between Europe and the US, but the studies confirm the asymmetric flow favouring the latter destination (Moguerou, 2005).

Second, previous quantitative studies have mainly investigated the issue through economic models such as endogenous growth models, equilibrium frameworks (Beine et al, 2001; Bhagwati & Hamada, 1974), optimal brain drain (Johnson & Regets, 1998), and GDP multiplier effects (Taylor, 1999). These models examined the effect of brain drain on human capital, welfare and the growth of sending and receiving countries. However, the nature of the topic demands in-depth insights rather than statistical information. Also, when it comes to statistics about researcher mobility from Europe, there is a lack of coherent information and data (Morano-Foadi, 2005). Thus, a synthesis of qualitative studies, a *meta-review*, was carried out and is reported on in this article.

Third, forced or involuntary migration of academics is usually overlooked when discussing the importance of mobility in academic careers. Academic mobility is often considered from the perspective of an individual's life course. However, it has now become a necessity rather than a choice (Morano-Foadi, 2005), either due to lack of opportunities in Europe or due to prospects of career progression in countries outside Europe. Thus, considering the demand for high skilled labour in the European markets, it is essential to study the permanent outflow of academic capital from Europe.

Overall, the contribution of this article is twofold. First, by conceptualising the academic mobility of researchers and faculty from the EU's perspective through a systematic review, this article extends the under-researched literature on academic brain drain through a qualitative synthesis. Second, it draws the attention of policy makers, practitioners, higher education staff and stakeholders to the burning concerns of attracting and retaining talent within the EU. Therefore, this manuscript serves as a background study to inform higher education reforms that seek to minimise or prevent brain drain.

This article analysing European academic brain drain is structured as follows. I start by providing a brief account of academic mobility and brain drain. The second section deals with the history and challenges to the internationalisation of higher education in Europe. The third section lists known reasons for brain drain. Fourth, the methodology for the meta synthesis is provided. Next, section five presents the findings from the meta synthesis. The conclusion discusses the problem of academic brain drain from Europe in light of the synthesis of what is known from previous studies.

## 2 | ACADEMIC MOBILITY AND BRAIN DRAIN: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Although academic mobility and internationalisation are not new concepts, yet while studying the academic mobility scenario of Europe, one cannot ignore the presence of brain drain (Saint-Blancat, 2018). In reviewing the vast literature on academic mobility, I start by outlining the relationship between academic mobility and brain drain.

The concept of *academic mobility* has been discussed in terms of student mobility (Findlay et al, 2012). However, far less attention has been paid to the mobility of academics and other researchers (Czaika & Toma, 2017). This is because of lacking data (Scott, 2015), inability to define academic mobility as a homogenous term and encouragement of short-term mobility through educational reforms (Morano-Foadi, 2005). Thus, there has been limited focus on academic mobility in terms of human capital loss or brain drain, especially from the perspective of the Global North.

Academic mobility can be categorised as short-term stays, long term mobility and permanent migration (Morano-Foadi, 2005). There is another dimension of *vertical* and *horizontal-lateral* academic mobility. In the former, the mobility is from a comparatively lower-income country to a higher-income country and is usually long term, whereas, in the latter, academics move among countries that are on a similar level to enhance learning and it is usually short term (Teichler, 2009). Further, the geographical classification can be internal (intra-EU) or external (outside EU) mobility. The approach taken in this article encompasses permanent stays outside EU, which fall into the definition of brain drain.

Although the global brain drain rhetoric has been challenged by the universal benefits of “brain circulation” and “beneficial brain drain” (Brown & Tannock, 2009), however, the permanent outflow of academics from Europe cannot be taken as positive. Since the term brain drain has a negative connotation, in policy areas neutral terms like *brain mobility* or *brain circulation* are preferred; however, one cannot ignore the complexities attached to the outbound migration (Fahey & Kenway, 2010).

One way to analyse academic mobility as brain drain or brain circulation is to find out the root causes of mobility by looking at push and pull factors. This requires a deeper analysis of the reasons for academics to leave. The following sections identify reasons for academic brain drain in Europe and shed light on how brain drain is one manifestation of academic mobility, a negative one.

### 3 | THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The European Commission's policy discourse on mobility focuses on enhancing regional attractiveness rather than nation states within Europe, and it can be understood in relation to Europe's competition with the US and China (Fahey & Kenway, 2010). Both the EU and the Organisation for the Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have published documents to highlight the importance of knowledge and knowledge workers for the economy of any state and therefore have emphasised the role of universities to attract and retain high-skilled workers (Cantwell, 2011). The solution to the brain drain problem is to make Europe more attractive than other nations, or as expressed by the League of European Research Universities, “brain drain should work in both directions” (Giannoccolo, 2009). Thus, the objective of Europe is to attract, retain and regain the academic labour that is lost due to brain drain.

An aim of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 was to form a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by introducing standardised higher education; by 2020, a total of 48 countries had joined this effort (Keeling, 2006). It promoted intra-European student mobility and introduced reforms to attract students worldwide to European higher education (Teichler, 2009). It was followed by the Lisbon Agenda in 2000 focusing on targets to create a competitive knowledge-based economy in the world (Leemann, 2018). The establishment of the European Research Area (ERA) encouraged mobility of researchers and academic professionals creating a “borderless academic career” (Morano-Foadi, 2005). However, as mentioned earlier, academic mobility can be understood as non-voluntary due to challenges of the academic labour market. Further, the harmonisation of higher education research due to the presence of academic capitalism, endangers the autonomy of researchers (Kim, 2017; Münch, 2014). Further, some observations have indicated that there are obstacles to embrace internationalisation successfully within the EU; due to e.g., what Morano-Foadi notes as “feudal like” hierarchies in southern European academic systems (Morano-Foadi, 2005).

### 4 | KNOWN REASONS FOR BRAIN DRAIN

International academic mobility has increased over the past few decades as an outcome of both pull and push factors of migration, or a combination of them (Van der Wende, 2015). The push and pull change model was initially introduced by Lewin (1975). According to this change model, there are some factors in the home country which *push* the professionals to migrate to the host country, while *pull* factors are responsible for the attractiveness of the host country.

The known reasons for brain drain of the highly skilled include push factors like political instability, unemployment and poor salaries. On the other hand, family reunions, higher living standards, and having a better future count as pull factors for brain drain (Alam & Hoque, 2010).

**TABLE 1** Characteristic of publications selected for meta synthesis

Author (s) and year	Source	Title	Region	Methodology
Aarnikoivu et al. (2019)	European Journal of Higher Education	Working outside academia? Perceptions of early-career, fixed-term researchers on changing careers	Finland	Qualitative (surveys)
Ackers (2008)	Minerva	Internationalisation, Mobility and Metrics: A New Form of Indirect Discrimination?	Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, Netherlands, UK	Qualitative (online survey plus 42 in depth interviews)
Altbach (2013)	Book	The International Imperative in Higher Education	global	conceptual
Brown and Tannock (2009)	Journal of Education Policy	Education, meritocracy and the global war for talent	OECD countries	conceptual
Cantwell (2011)	Minerva	Transnational Mobility and International Academic Employment: Gatekeeping in an Academic Competition Arena	UK and US	Qualitative (49 interviews)
Courtois and Veiga (2020)	Higher Education	Brexit and higher education in Europe: the role of ideas in shaping internationalisation strategies in times of uncertainty	Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland and UK	Qualitative (127 interviews)
De Wit (2012)	Book chapter	Student Mobility Between Europe and the Rest of the World: Trends, Issues and Challenges.	Europe	Qualitative (8 themes of conference)
Fahey and Kenway (2010)	Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education	International academic mobility: problematic and possible paradigms	Europe, USA, South East Asia	Qualitative (data obtained from conference and report)
Fumasoli and Goastellec (2015)	Book chapter	Global models, disciplinary and local patterns in academic recruitment processes.	Croatia, Austria, Poland, Romania, Switzerland, Germany, Finland, Ireland	Qualitative (500 plus interviews)
Grigolo et al. (2010)	European Political Science	Shifting from Academic 'Brain Drain' to 'Brain Gain' in Europe	Europe	Qualitative (reflections on findings of Max weber program)

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Author (s) and year	Source	Title	Region	Methodology
Janger et al. (2019)	Higher Education	Attractiveness of jobs in academia: a cross-country perspective	Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK	Mixed method
Kim (2017)	Higher Education	Academic mobility, transnational identity capital, and stratification under conditions of academic capitalism	UK, USA, New Zealand, Korea and Hong Kong	Qualitative (interviews)
Leemann (2018)	European Educational Research Journal	Free movement of people and capital and the standard of transnational academic mobility: Principles of governance in the European Research Area	ERA	Qualitative (policy analysis)
Mendoza et al. (2020)	Population, Space and Place	"Knowledge migrants" or "economic migrants"? patterns of academic mobility and migration from southern Europe to Mexico	Spanish and Italian academics in Mexico	Qualitative (semi structured interviews 25)
Morano-Foadi (2005)	International Migration	Scientific Mobility, Career Progression, and Excellence in the European Research Area	ERA	Qualitative (empirical)
Morano-Foadi (2006)	International Migration	Scientific mobility, career progression, and excellence in the European Research Area	Austria, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and the UK	Qualitative (empirical findings of MOBEX project)
Musselin (2004)	Higher Education	Towards a European academic labour market? some lessons drawn from empirical studies on academic mobility.	Europe	Qualitative (Interviews)
Naidoo (2016)	British Journal of Sociology of Education	The competition fetish in higher education: varieties, animators and consequences	Geopolitical	Conceptual
Oliver (2012)	The International Journal of Human Resource Management	"Living Flexibly? How Europe's Science Researchers Manage Mobility, Fixed-Term Employment and Life Outside of Work	Austria, Greece, Italy, Portugal and UK	Qualitative (interviews)
Panagiotakopoulos (2020)	World Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development	Investigating the factors affecting brain drain in Greece: looking beyond the obvious	Greece	Qualitative (semi structured interviews)

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Author (s) and year	Source	Title	Region	Methodology
Saint-Blancat (2018)	Higher Education Policy	Making Sense of Scientific Mobility: How Italian Scientists Look Back on Their Trajectories of Mobility in the EU	Italy	Qualitative (83 in depth interviews)
Scott (2015)	European Review	Dynamics of Academic Mobility: Hegemonic Internationalisation or Fluid Globalisation	North America, Western Europe, East Asia	Conceptual
Slantcheva (2003)	Higher Education	The Bulgarian academic profession in transition	Bulgaria	Qualitative (11 interviews)
Toma and Villares-Varela (2019)	Sociology	The Role of Migration Policies in the Attraction and Retention of International Talent: The Case of Indian Researchers	Indian researchers in: UK, USA, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Switzerland, Taiwan	Qualitative (40 interviews)
Van der Wende (2015)	European Review	International academic mobility: Towards a concentration of the minds in Europe	Europe	Conceptual

Source: Author.



Academia possesses its own determinants of migration which can overlap with others. Academic mobility can occur due to voluntary or involuntary reasons. It can be due to personal aspirations of broadening one's knowledge and expertise which include better employment conditions, reputations of universities, and the ability to have more autonomy over one's research (Kim, 2017; OECD, 2008); whereas involuntary reasons for migration consist of fixed term employment contracts in the country of origin, job market saturation and legislation (Janger et al, 2019).

Within academia, factors accelerating the mobility of researchers from the EU include the standardisation of higher education through top-down policy initiatives—like the Bologna process and Lisbon strategy (Djerasimovic & Villani, 2020) which endangered the autonomy of researchers due to academic capitalism; reduced public investment in higher education; and increased temporary contractually based employment (Grigolo et al, 2010).

## 5 | METHODOLOGY

Qualitative meta-synthesis is an emerging research technique which integrates, evaluates and interprets the existing findings from qualitative studies on a topic or research question (Ludvigsen Hall et al, 2016). It is a parallel technique to quantitative meta-analysis however it is quite different in approach. The quantitative meta-analysis investigates cause and effect relationships whereas, the qualitative meta-synthesis understands and examines concepts and ideas (Walsh & Downe, 2005). The quantitative meta-analysis approach is limited by the consistency of research questions, adequacy of statistical samples and uniformity of outcome measurements (Rozas & Klein, 2010).

The benefit of using a qualitative meta synthesis approach in the research on which this article reports is that it describes human experiences in an accessible and synthesised form that is helpful for informing policies and practices. Unlike quantitative meta-analysis which aims to reduce the findings to a *common metric*, the meta synthesis approach describes a broad range of interpretive findings of qualitative studies. Further, it has the potential to support theory development and the results can help in implementation and intervention (Ludvigsen et al, 2016).

Qualitative studies were chosen on the basis of topical similarity, aims of research, research questions and findings. To find a meaningful interpretation of findings of existing data, this analysis focused on studies which dealt with academic mobility from Europe to other countries, the role of higher education internationalisation policies in the EU and global competition for talent. For the primary collection of data, searches were carried out on the platforms Web of Science and Scopus using modified terms such as *academic mobility* OR *brain drain* OR *human capital outflow* AND *Europe* OR *European Research Area* AND *literature review* OR *meta synthesis* OR *systematic review*. These scientific databases have been found comprehensive and have already been used in academic literature reviews of international mobility (Rattrie & Kittler, 2014). The timeline chosen for collecting the articles was from the year 2000, right after the Bologna process, until 2020. According to Torracco (2005), 20 years is long enough to gather data about a topic for consistent results.

The initial sample consisted of 266 articles from all the databases. The first step of screening involved removing duplicate articles from both databases using the software package Refworks. In the second step, after reading abstracts and full texts, wrongly listed articles were removed. As a third step, after careful examination, articles which did not deal with the topical focus of academic brain drain from the EU were removed. Lastly, the publications were shortlisted on the basis of methodology and only conceptual and qualitative articles were chosen. In total 25 publications were chosen (Table 1) because they explicitly dealt with academic mobility from Europe and European higher education policies and were published between 2000 and 2020 in English. Most of the publications included for analysis presented a qualitative methodology (21), while a few were conceptual (3), and one article (1) was based on a mixed method approach. In addition to these trends, it was observed that seven articles were published before 2010 while the majority (18) of articles addressing academic mobility were published after 2010 showing a recent concern over the issue (for further details see Table 1).

The methodological limitations of this study include the use of secondary data analysis of specific qualitative studies to examine European academic migrants. Further, the publications included for this meta-synthesis have acknowledged the incomplete and imperfect data about the exact numbers of academic migrants flowing from Europe.

## 6 | FINDINGS

All of the studies included for final analysis articulated a clear purpose and aim. Several themes emerged from the meta synthesis of the 25 shortlisted articles published between 2000 and 2020. Overall, the attractiveness of the EU seemed to comprise of language issues; hierarchical academic structures; staffing and governance issues; tensions between national higher education systems and internationalisation demands for a borderless university; and recognition of study achievements of non-EU students and staff. Unlike the EU, the attractiveness of international destinations was enhanced by financial rewards, the reputation of universities, a well-defined career ladder and immigration policies. Despite this vast range of push and pull factors, the focus in this article is on just five overlapping and emerging themes highlighting forces promoting the migration of academics from the EU to adequately answer the research goal. These five factors are discussed in the following, namely: (1) salaries, (2) job insecurity, (3) recruitment procedures, (4) migration policies, and (5) the internationalisation of higher education.

### 6.1 | Forced mobility due to low salary

Higher salaries and better working conditions are among the most important pull factors for migration (Morano-Foadi, 2006). Grigolo et al. (2010) argue that unfortunately the highest paid academic salaries in Europe cannot compete with the US or Japan. Their study reveals that even average academic salaries in Europe are far behind those offered in the US. According to their regression analysis, the average salaries of academic researchers after tax in US are € 62,793 whereas in Europe, they are € 40,126 EUR, representing a massive difference of 37%. This vast difference is partially due to the economic downturn in 2008, which forced European universities to cut their budgets and to dedicate a lower proportion of GDP to fund public universities. Further, the salary structures at universities in the EU are so weak that they will likely be unattractive to UK based academics after Brexit (Courtois & Veiga, 2020).

In addition, the in-depth analysis of academic staffing in four European countries by Huisman et al. (2002) highlights that poor salaries in Europe is one of the reasons why young academics choose to work in the private sector. However, we must consider that there is heterogeneity within European countries. A report published by the European Commission in 2007 calculated the adjusted weighted average total annual salary for researchers across the European Union; the highest salary was as high as € 62,406 in Austria, whereas the lowest recorded was € 3,556 in Bulgaria (European Commission, 2007). The difference is almost eighteen-fold, which shows a huge disparity within the EU. Further, it signifies that some EU member countries have the potential to compete with brain drain host destinations outside Europe. Countries with the best salaries for academics include the US, Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and Saudi Arabia; these countries benefit from a large inflow of academics (Altbach, 2013).

### 6.2 | Forced mobility due to job insecurity

Job insecurity due to short term contractual positions in academia is a major push factor, more than salary (Ackers, 2008). Researchers, especially those who are at the early career stage suffer from short term, temporary

and fixed contracts. The majority of researchers in the EU depend on grants due to the unavailability of permanent positions (Morano-Foadi, 2005).

Short term contract-based employment has increased dramatically in academia. According to statistics from the UK, the percentage of full-term contracts at the University of Cambridge was 25.8%, Imperial College London 28.3%, Oxford 31.9% and University College London 33% (Kim, 2009). The uncertainty related to fixed term employment creates insecurity among researchers, and mobility becomes a necessity rather than a choice to excel in a career (Oliver, 2012).

In a study which examined the recruitment process in eight European countries, the authors argue that temporary positions in academia are an unconventional trend which has been seen in the last few decades resulting in more workload for the academics (Fumasoli & Goastellec, 2015). As a result, an increased workload is leading to more stress for the researchers. Similarly, Aarnikoivu et al. (2019) note that poor working conditions due to insufficient salary and depressing career prospects in the European academic labour market are causing stress for both doctoral students and post-doctoral students. Arguably, the “up or out” tenure system in the US is not ideal for young researchers either; however, it does ensure a clear career path for academics (Altbach, 2013).

While examining the prospects of postgraduates in southern European countries, it was revealed that the future of post-PhD permanent employment is bleak (Mendoza et al., 2020). Accordingly, this dismal condition of the academic labour market causes job dissatisfaction and increases the woes of job insecurity which eventually lead to long term mobility decisions.

### 6.3 | Brain drain resulting from unfair recruitment procedures

Although European countries have delegated the autonomy for human resource planning to higher education institutions, yet an important role is played by top level higher education sector policies (European Commission, 2017). The recruitment procedures in Europe vary from country to country; in some countries, universities are in control completely, while in others, the government approves the decision. However, there is a lack of transparency in both cases and the principles used for selection are not always fair (Ackers, 2008; Musselin, 2004). A similar argument has been supported by Mendoza et al. (2020), when they examined the condition of southern European universities and research centres—they argue that there is lack of fair competition in the recruitment process. Getting recruited in academia, without personal contacts, is rare (Ackers, 2008; Slantcheva, 2003). Morano-Foadi (2006) comes to a similar conclusion. According to her research, early career researchers who opt to migrate are those who are not willing to enter into a system based more on networking than merit. This kind of recruitment process that is based on personal contacts is a threat to merit-based systems in academia (Slantcheva, 2003). In addition, higher education reforms have introduced standardised recruitment processes, yet informal practices of recruitment are still exercised in universities (Fumasoli & Goastellec, 2015).

### 6.4 | Mobility due to attractive migration policies

Migration policies play a significant role in the attraction and retention of academic researchers. On the one hand, the facilitative administrative process in obtaining a residence permit or visa may slightly impact a researcher's mobility decisions; however, post-entry rights in the form of immigration policies have a more powerful impact on these decisions (Toma & Villares-Varela, 2019). International postdoctoral scholars tend to negotiate their mobility with the residency rights of the host country. For instance, in the US the most desirable academic jobs are those which offer an H-1B visa which can eventually lead to a Green Card (Cantwell, 2011). Likewise, the immigration policies for highly skilled in Canada and Australia have been consciously tailored to attract and retain international talent (Altbach, 2013). In contrast, the fear of anti-immigrant nationalist policies or strict immigration laws have

a detrimental effect on attracting academics in most European countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Italy (De Wit, 2012).

## 6.5 | Neoliberal higher education internationalisation as a cause for brain drain

The European Union's agenda to become the most competitive *knowledge economy* in the world aspires to build economic supremacy and generate revenue through higher education (Kim, 2017). Leemann (2018) has comprehensively discussed the intention to promote academic mobility in the European Research Area (ERA). She states that the rationale of declaring the EU a *knowledge society* was purely economic and had a neoliberal logic. The governance models of *managing* knowledge—based on indicators (publications in journals with impact factors, league tables, international research periods etc.) and practices—truly depicted market-based objectives by quantifying knowledge (Leemann, 2018; Scott, 2015). By seeking these governance models, European universities are trying to emulate the US to enhance their competitiveness (Brown & Tannock, 2009). Here it has to be acknowledged that these neoliberal indicators, are not the only but a relevant and contributing factor for brain drain.

At the time of fiscal pressures, governments try to reduce spending on higher education while maintaining the budget of other sectors like healthcare and basic education. This results in a funding shortage for higher education which is then covered by private sources (Farhan, 2016). Hence, private sources of funding foster competition, in which both the buyers and sellers of academic talent want to maintain their competitiveness through material and normative forces (Cantwell, 2011).

Moreover, the autonomy of universities and researchers was challenged by the Bologna process and the Lisbon Agenda (Keeling, 2006; Kim, 2017). The rules of the game have been defined by academic capitalism which has endangered the autonomy of research as seen in the UK and Germany (Kim, 2017). A position derived from this is that knowledge is no longer seen as a public good, as it has been commodified through neoliberal reforms in higher education (Naidoo, 2016).

The establishment of the EHEA and the educational reforms of the Bologna process have some visible and invisible implications on academic mobility (Scott, 2015). By reducing the barriers for international mobility, these policies have opened doors for permanent migration. As Van der Wende (2015, p. 81) states, “The European open labour market for research with envisaged brain circulation may easily turn into a brain drain–brain gain situation”.

One of the ramifications of the rise of neoliberalism in higher education has been articulated as a “global war of talent” (OECD, 2008). This talent war is triggering unhealthy competition between universities to attract and retain the best and the brightest while compromising on social justice and the wider purpose of education (Naidoo, 2016).

## 7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present meta-synthesis has fulfilled the purpose of compiling current qualitative knowledge about academic mobility in Europe. The emphasis of previous quantitative studies was on the brain drain from developing countries and it was focused more on economic gains and losses. Quantitative studies are more standardised and have ignored the in-depth reasons behind academic brain drain. Findings from this study provide new insights to academic brain drain in Europe. In this study, both push and pull factors for migration were found to impact brain drain. On one hand, massive differences in income and attractive migration policies pull academic migrants from the EU to favourable destinations. On the other hand, unfavourable conditions such as short-term temporary contracts, unfair recruitment procedures and loss of researcher autonomy push the highly skilled to leave the EU.

While higher education policies encourage short term mobility of researchers to promote a knowledge-based economy and to foster international competition and economic growth, they are indirectly encouraging brain

drain. This is because the top-down educational reforms have subjugated the autonomy of researchers and universities and directed them more towards economic indicators. A consequence has been that migration has become a necessity rather than a choice for academics to advance their career.

The findings from this study have enhanced our understanding about European academic labour market issues and the impact of policies. Thus, these findings are helpful for all the stakeholders of academic mobility including European governments, universities and academic researchers interested in how to attract and retain academics in Europe better.

There is a need to design a thorough policy to support a better understanding of the number of outgoing academics from Europe and to tackle this issue. This would require an inclusive approach to make Europe more attractive for researchers, especially in the post Brexit era, when the quality and reputation of European research will be at risk due to the loss of prestige associated with UK universities as compared to continental European universities (Courtois & Veiga, 2020). The EU is trying to implement a range of policies to stop losing its talent to other countries. A recent study (Boc, 2020) proposes that the European Universities Initiative and the EU Horizon 2020 programme, if implemented strategically, have the potential to diminish brain drain. This means delegating the authority to the people who are affected by this issue.

Overall, it was challenging to generalise the results for a European academic labour market considering the striking differences between EU countries, which fosters the academic mobility within EU countries. Moreover, due to the narrow scope of this research, it has not been possible to reflect completely on the asymmetrical flow of migrants within the EU and on the wider international scale apart from the US. Lastly, the quality of academics that migrate has not been addressed in detail. However, the study contributes an overview on which future research on policies that help to attract and retain talent can build. Another dimension that would benefit from further enquiry is how academic mobility can be transformed into brain circulation and return migration to foster economic development in the EU.

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